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## Coronavirus and philosophers

M. Foucault, G. Agamben, J.L. Nancy, R. Esposito, S. Benvenuto, D. Dwivedi, S. Mohan, R. Ronchi, M. de Carolis

Michel Foucault

**From “Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison”, translated by A. Sheridan, pp. 195-228. Vintage Books, 1995.**

(in collaboration with the Journal “Antinomie”, <https://antinomie.it/>)

The following, according to an order published at the end of the seventeenth century, were the measures to be taken when the plague appeared in a town.

First, a strict spatial partitioning: the closing of the town and its outlying districts, a prohibition to leave the town on pain of death, the killing of all stray animals; the division of the town into distinct quarters, each governed by an intendant. Each street is placed under the authority of a syndic, who keeps it under surveillance; if he leaves the street, he will be condemned to death. On the appointed day, everyone is ordered to stay indoors: it is forbidden to leave on pain of death. The syndic himself comes to lock the door of each house from the outside; he takes the key with him and hands it over to the intendant of the quarter; the intendant keeps it until the end of the quarantine. Each family will have made its own provisions; but, for bread and wine, small wooden canals are set up between the street and the interior of the houses, thus allowing each person to receive his ration without communicating with the suppliers and other residents; meat, fish and herbs will be hoisted up into the houses with pulleys and baskets. If it is absolutely necessary to leave the house, it will be done in turn, avoiding any meeting. Only the intendants, syndics and guards will move about the streets and also, between the infected houses, from one corpse to another, the “crows”, who can be left to die: these are “people of little substance who carry the sick, bury the dead, clean and do many vile and abject offices”. It is a segmented, immobile, frozen space. Each individual is fixed in his place. And, if he moves, he does so at the risk of his life, contagion or punishment.

Inspection functions ceaselessly. The gaze is alert everywhere: “A considerable body of militia, commanded by good officers and men of substance”, guards at the gates, at the town hall and in every quarter to ensure the prompt obedience of the people and the most absolute authority of the magistrates, “as also to observe all disorder, theft and extortion”. At each of the town gates there will be an observation post; at the end of each street sentinels. Every day, the intendant visits the quarter in his charge, inquires whether the syndics have carried out their tasks, whether the inhabitants have anything to complain of; they “observe their actions”. Every day, too, the syndic goes into the street for which he is responsible; stops before each house: gets all the inhabitants to appear at the windows (those who live overlooking the courtyard will be allocated a window looking onto the street at which no one but they may show themselves); he calls each of them by name; informs himself as to the state of each and every one of them “in which respect the inhabitants will be compelled to speak the truth under pain of death”; if someone does not appear at the window, the syndic must ask why: “In this way he will find out easily enough whether dead or sick are being concealed.” Everyone locked up in his cage, everyone at his window, answering to his name and showing himself when asked — it is the great review of the living and the dead.

This surveillance is based on a system of permanent registration: reports from the syndics to the intendants, from the intendants to the magistrates or mayor. At the beginning of the “lock up”, the role of each of the inhabitants present in the town is laid down, one by one; this document bears “the name, age, sex of everyone, notwithstanding his condition”: a copy is sent to the intendant of

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Book: In Freud's Tracks



the quarter, another to the office of the town hall, another to enable the syndic to make his daily roll call. Everything that may be observed during the course of the visits — deaths, illnesses, complaints, irregularities is noted down and transmitted to the intendants and magistrates. The magistrates have complete control over medical treatment; they have appointed a physician in charge; no other practitioner may treat, no apothecary prepare medicine, no confessor visit a sick person without having received from him a written note “to prevent anyone from concealing and dealing with those sick of the contagion, unknown to the magistrates”. The registration of the pathological must be constantly centralized. The relation of each individual to his disease and to his death passes through the representatives of power, the registration they make of it, the decisions they take on it.

Five or six days after the beginning of the quarantine, the process of purifying the houses one by one is begun. All the inhabitants are made to leave; in each room “the furniture and goods” are raised from the ground or suspended from the air; perfume is poured around the room; after carefully sealing the windows, doors and even the keyholes with wax, the perfume is set alight. Finally, the entire house is closed while the perfume is consumed; those who have carried out the work are searched, as they were on entry, “in the presence of the residents of the house, to see that they did not have something on their persons as they left that they did not have on entering”. Four hours later, the residents are allowed to re-enter their homes.

This enclosed, segmented space, observed at every point, in which the individuals are inserted in a fixed place, in which the slightest movements are supervised, in which all events are recorded, in which an uninterrupted work of writing links the centre and periphery, in which power is exercised without division, according to a continuous hierarchical figure, in which each individual is constantly located, examined and distributed among the living beings, the sick and the dead — all this constitutes a compact model of the disciplinary mechanism. The plague is met by order; its function is to sort out every possible confusion: that of the disease, which is transmitted when bodies are mixed together; that of the evil, which is increased when fear and death overcome prohibitions. It lays down for each individual his place, his body, his disease and his death, his well-being, by means of an omnipresent and omniscient power that subdivides itself in a regular, uninterrupted way even to the ultimate determination of the individual, of what characterizes him, of what belongs to him, of what happens to him. Against the plague, which is a mixture, discipline brings into play its power, which is one of analysis. A whole literary fiction of the festival grew up around the plague: suspended laws, lifted prohibitions, the frenzy of passing time, bodies mingling together without respect, individuals unmasked, abandoning their statutory identity and the figure under which they had been recognized, allowing a quite different truth to appear. But there was also a political dream of the plague, which was exactly its reverse: not the collective festival, but strict divisions; not laws transgressed, but the penetration of regulation into even the smallest details of everyday life through the mediation of the complete hierarchy that assured the capillary functioning of power; not masks that were put on and taken off, but the assignment to each individual of his “true” name, his “true” place, his “true” body, his “true” disease. The plague as a form, at once real and imaginary, of disorder had as its medical and political correlative discipline. Behind the disciplinary mechanisms can be read the haunting memory of “contagions”, of the plague, of rebellions, crimes, vagabondage, desertions, people who appear and disappear, live and die in disorder.

If it is true that the leper gave rise to rituals of exclusion, which to a certain extent provided the model for and general form of the great Confinement, then the plague gave rise to disciplinary projects. Rather than the massive, binary division between one set of people and another, it called for multiple separations, individualizing distributions, an organization in depth of surveillance and control, an intensification and a ramification of power. The leper was caught up in a practice of rejection, of exile-enclosure; he was left to his doom in a mass among which it was useless to differentiate; those sick of the plague were caught up in a meticulous tactical partitioning in which individual differentiations were the constricting effects of a power that multiplied, articulated and subdivided itself; the great confinement on the one hand; the correct training on the other. The leper and his separation; the plague and its segmentations. The first is marked; the second analysed and distributed. The exile of the leper and the arrest of the plague do not bring with them the same political dream. The first is that of a pure community, the second that of a disciplined society. Two ways of exercising power over men, of controlling their relations, of separating out

their dangerous mixtures. The plague-stricken town, traversed throughout with hierarchy, surveillance, observation, writing; the town immobilized by the functioning of an extensive power that bears in a distinct way over all individual bodies – this is the utopia of the perfectly governed city. The plague (envisaged as a possibility at least) is the trial in the course of which one may define ideally the exercise of disciplinary power. In order to make rights and laws function according to pure theory, the jurists place themselves in imagination in the state of nature; in order to see perfect disciplines functioning, rulers dreamt of the state of plague. Underlying disciplinary projects the image of the plague stands for all forms of confusion and disorder; just as the image of the leper, cut off from all human contact, underlies projects of exclusion.

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**Giorgio Agamben**

***The Invention of an Epidemic***

(Published in Italian on *Quodlibet*, <https://www.quodlibet.it/giorgio-agamben-l-invenzione-di-un-epidemia>)

26/02/2020

Faced with the frenetic, irrational and entirely unfounded emergency measures adopted against an alleged epidemic of coronavirus, we should begin from the declaration issued by the National Research Council (CNR), which states not only that “there is no SARS-CoV2 epidemic in Italy”, but also that “the infection, according to the epidemiologic data available as of today and based on tens of thousands of cases, causes mild/moderate symptoms (a sort of influenza) in 80-90% of cases. In 10-15% of cases a pneumonia may develop, but one with a benign outcome in the large majority of cases. It has been estimated that only 4% of patients require intensive therapy”.

If this is the real situation, why do the media and the authorities do their utmost to spread a state of panic, thus provoking an authentic state of exception with serious limitations on movement and a suspension of daily life in entire regions?

Two factors can help explain such a disproportionate response. First and foremost, what is once again manifest is the tendency to use a state of exception as a normal paradigm for government. The legislative decree immediately approved by the government “for hygiene and public safety reasons” actually produces an authentic militarization “of the municipalities and areas with the presence of at least one person who tests positive and for whom the source of transmission is unknown, or in which there is at least one case that is not ascribable to a person who recently returned from an area already affected by the virus”. Such a vague and undetermined definition will make it possible to rapidly extend the state of exception to all regions, as it’s almost impossible that other such cases will not appear elsewhere. Let’s consider the serious limitations of freedom the decree contains: a) a prohibition against any individuals leaving the affected municipality or area; b) a prohibition against anyone from outside accessing the affected municipality or area; c) the suspension of events or initiatives of any nature and of any form of gatherings in public or private places, including those of a cultural, recreational, sporting and religious nature, including enclosed spaces if they are open to the public; d) the closure of kindergartens, childcare services and schools of all levels, as well as the attendance of school, higher education activities and professional courses, except for distance learning; e) the closure to the public of museums and other cultural institutions and spaces as listed in article 101 of the code of cultural and landscape heritage, pursuant to Legislative Decree 22 January 2004, no. 42. All regulations on free access to those institutions and spaces are also suspended; f) suspension of all educational trips both in Italy and abroad; g) suspension of all public examination procedures and all activities of public offices, without prejudice to the provision of essential and public utility services; h) the enforcement of quarantine measures and active surveillance of individuals who have had close contacts with confirmed cases of infection.

The disproportionate reaction to what according to the CNR is something not too different from the normal flus that affect us every year is quite blatant. It is almost as if with terrorism exhausted as a cause for exceptional measures, the invention of an epidemic offered the ideal pretext for scaling

them up beyond any limitation.

The other no less disturbing factor is the state of fear that in recent years has evidently spread among individual consciences and that translates into an authentic need for situations of collective panic for which the epidemic provides once again the ideal pretext. Therefore, in a perverse vicious circle, the limitations of freedom imposed by governments are accepted in the name of a desire for safety that was created by the same governments that are now intervening to satisfy it.

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**Jean-Luc Nancy**

***Viral Exception***

(Published in Italian on "Antinomie", <https://antinomie.it/index.php/2020/02/27/eccezione-virale/> 😊)

27/02/2020

Giorgio Agamben, an old friend, argues that the coronavirus is hardly different from a normal flu. He forgets that for the "normal" flu there is a vaccine that has been proven effective. And even that needs to be readapted to viral mutations year after year. Despite this, the "normal" flu always kills several people, while coronavirus, against which there is no vaccine, is evidently capable of causing far higher levels of mortality. The difference (according to sources of the same type as those Agamben uses) is about 1 to 30: it does not seem an insignificant difference to me.

Giorgio states that governments take advantage of all sorts of pretexts to continuously establish states of exception. But he fails to note that the exception is indeed becoming the rule in a world where technical interconnections of all kinds (movement, transfers of every type, impregnation or spread of substances, and so on) are reaching a hitherto unknown intensity that is growing at the same rate as the population. Even in rich countries this increase in population entails a longer life expectancy, hence an increase in the number of elderly people and, in general, of people at risk.

We must be careful not to hit the wrong target: an entire civilization is in question, there is no doubt about it. There is a sort of viral exception – biological, computer-scientific, cultural – which is pandemic. Governments are nothing more than grim executioners, and taking it out on them seems more like a diversionary manoeuvre than a political reflection.

I mentioned that Giorgio is an old friend. And I apologize for bringing up a personal recollection, but I am not abandoning a register of general reflection by doing so. Almost thirty years ago doctors decided I needed a heart transplant. Giorgio was one of the very few who advised me not to listen to them. If I had followed his advice, I would have probably died soon enough. It is possible to make a mistake. Giorgio is nevertheless a spirit of such finesse and kindness that one may define him –without the slightest irony – as exceptional.

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**Roberto Esposito**

***Cured to the Bitter End***

28/02/2020

In this text by Nancy I find all the traits that have always characterized him – in particular an intellectual generosity I was personally effected by in the past, drawing immense inspiration from his thinking, especially in my work on communities. What interrupted our dialogue at one point was Nancy's sharp opposition to the paradigm of biopolitics, to which he has always opposed, as in this text, the relevance of technological apparatus – as if the two things were necessarily in contrast. While in fact even the term “viral” itself points to a biopolitical contamination between different languages – political, social, medical and technological – united by the same immune syndrome, meant as a polarity semantically opposed to the lexicon of *communitas*. Though Derrida himself used the category of immunisation extensively, Nancy's refusal to confront himself with the paradigm of biopolitics was probably influenced by the dystonia with regard to Foucault that he inherited from Derrida. In any case, we are talking about three of the most important contemporary philosophers.

It remains a fact that anyone with eyes to see cannot deny the constant deployment of biopolitics. From the intervention of biotechnology on domains that were once considered exclusively natural, like birth and death, to bioterrorism, the management of immigration and more or less serious epidemics, all political conflicts today have the relation between politics and biological life at their core. But this reference to Foucault in itself should lead us to not losing sight of the historically differentiated character of biopolitical phenomena. One thing is claiming, as Foucault does, that in the last two and half centuries politics and biology have progressively formed an ever tighter knot, with problematic and sometimes tragic results. Another is to assimilate incomparable incidents and experiences. I would personally avoid making any sort of comparison between maximum security prisons and a two-week quarantine in the Po Lowlands. From the legal point of view, of course, emergency decreeing, long since applied even to cases like this one, in which it is not absolutely necessary, pushes politics towards procedures of exception that may in the long run undermine the balance of power in favour of the executive branch. But to talk of risks to democracy in this case seems to me an exaggeration to say the least. I think that we should try to separate levels and distinguish between long-running processes and recent events. With regard to the former, politics and medicine have been tied in mutual implications for at least three centuries, something that has ultimately transformed both. On the one hand this has led to a process of medicalization of politics, which, seemingly unburdened of any ideological limitations, shows itself as more and more dedicated to “curing” its citizens from risks it is often responsible for emphasizing. On the other we witness a politicization of medicine, invested with tasks of social control that do not belong to it – which explains the extremely heterogeneous assessments virologists are making on the nature and gravity of the coronavirus. Both these tendencies deform politics compared to its classic profile. Also because its objectives no longer comprehend single individuals or social classes, but segments of population differentiated according to health, age, gender or even ethnic group.

But once again, with regard to absolutely legitimate concerns, it is necessary not to lose our sense of proportion. It seems to me that what is happening in Italy today, with the chaotic and rather grotesque overlapping of national and regional prerogatives, has more the character of a breakdown of public authorities than that of a dramatic totalitarian grip.

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***Riposte by Jean-Luc Nancy to Roberto Esposito (through email to Sergio Benvenuto):***

“Dear Robert, neither “biology” nor “politics” are precisely determined terms today. I would actually say the contrary. That's why I

have no use for their assemblage.  
Best regards, Jean-Luc"

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2-III-2020

**Sergio Benvenuto**

***Welcome to Seclusion***

(Published in Italian on *Antinomie*, <https://antinomie.it/index.php/2020/03/05/benvenuto-in-clausura/>)

I am neither a virologist nor an epidemiologist, yet the idea has formed in my mind that – though over seventy, and hence among the most vulnerable – I have little to fear from the coronavirus for *my* health. “*For mine*”, for mere reasons of probability, like when I fly on a plane: it could crash, but it’s highly unlikely. In fact, so far only around 3000<sup>[1]</sup> people worldwide have died as a consequence of the virus. Practically nothing compared to the 80,000 killed by common flus in 2019. Those who have died in Italy from the epidemic (over 50 at the moment of writing<sup>[2]</sup>) are probably less than those killed in car accidents plus worker fatalities. In short, I am not so much scared of contagion, but I’m more concerned about the economic backlash for a country like mine, in constant decline since 1990s. After all, poverty kills too.

But I also know that my relative disregard, though rationally based, is civically reprehensible: were I a good citizen I should behave *as if* I were panic-stricken. Because everything that’s being done in Italy (closing schools, stadiums, museums, theatres and so on) has a purely preventive function, it only slows down the spread of the virus. It plays on large numbers, but appeals to each *particular being*.

The panic that has stricken Italy (but not only, all over the world people are talking about nothing else) was basically a political choice – or a biopolitical one, as Roberto Esposito stresses – established first and foremost by the World Health Organization. Because today, in an era when the great democracies are producing grotesque leaderships, it’s the great supranational organizations like the WHO – and the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund, the European Central Bank, the other central banks, and so on – that (fortunately) take the real decisions, thus partly redressing the neo-fascist whims of today’s democracies. Tedros Adhanom, the Ethiopian who is Director General of the WHO, has clearly stated the need for prevention: he knows that *for the time being* Covid-19 is not causing disasters and that maybe in the end it could turn out to have been nothing more than an insidious influenza. But it could also turn into what the so-called “Spanish” flu became in 1918: the latter infected a third of the planet’s population causing something between 20 and 50 million deaths, more victims than all military casualties during the First World War. In other words, what’s really frightening is not *what we know*, but *what we do not know about the virus*, and there’s very little we do know about it. We are getting to know it day by day and so it creates the anxiety – by no means irrational – of the unknown.

Note that in the case of the “Spanish” flu political power acted in exactly the opposite way as it is doing today: it concealed the epidemic, because in most cases the countries involved were at war. It was named the “Spanish” flu simply because at the time it was only in Spain, which was not at war, that the media talked about it (but apparently the flu originated in the United States). Political power today (which is, I stress once more, increasingly supranational in economics too) has chosen the strategy of panic, so as to encourage people to isolate the virus. And indeed, the isolation of the infected still remains, after centuries, the best strategy to suppress incurable epidemics. Leprosy was contained in Europe – as Foucault too stresses – precisely by isolating lepers as much as possible, often relegating them to faraway islands, like Molokai in Hawaii, where various movies have been filmed.

In August 2011 I was in New York when it was about to be hit by Hurricane Irene, which had

already devastated the Antilles. I was struck by the way experts and politicians on the media all gave frankly quite cataclysmic messages to citizens: "it will be a complete disaster – the refrain was – because New Yorkers couldn't care less, they're snobs". But it turned out that they followed the guidelines scrupulously (even I vacated my garden respecting the precepts) and Irene crossed New York causing no damage. So, did those experts and politicians get it all wrong, or did they have a bit of fun terrifying the population of New York? No, a disaster was avoided. In some cases, spreading terror can be wiser than taking things "philosophically".

Let's imagine that Italy as a whole – from the media to government officials – had opted for the "Spanish" strategy, deciding not to take any precautions and allowing Covid-19 to spread across the country like a normal flu. Every other country, including other European states, would have immediately isolated Italy, considering the whole country a hotbed: something that would have caused far greater economic damage than the considerable one Italy is enduring now. When others are scared – for example the Israelis and Qataris, who have prohibited Italians from entering their countries – we're better off being scared too. Sometimes being scared is an act of courage.

Let's imagine that, once allowed to spread at will 20 million Italians caught the virus: if it's true, as the earliest calculations indicate, that COVID-19 is deadly for 2% of those infected, this would have led to the death of around 400,000 Italians, mainly senior citizens. A hypothesis many do not consider entirely negative, because it would allow our old-age pensions system to breathe: Why not trim down a few oldies in a country that's ageing by the minute? is what they think without saying it. But I don't think public opinion would have accepted 400,000 deaths. The oppositions would have risen up, the government would have been ousted by popular acclaim and the far-right leader Salvini would have won the elections with at least 60% of the popular vote. In short, the precautionary measures that have been taken, however painful – especially because of the economic damage – are the lesser evil.

The measures taken in Italy are not therefore, as one of my favourite philosophers, Giorgio Agamben, argues, the result of the despotic instinct of the ruling classes, who are viscerally passionate about the "state of exception". Thinking that the measures adopted in China, South Korea, Italy and so on are the consequence of a conspiracy means falling into what other philosophers have called "conspiratorial theories of history". I would call them paranoiac interpretations of history, like the millions who believe 9/11 was a CIA plot. My domestic worker, a very good-natured woman, is convinced that the epidemic was schemed by the "Arabs", by which I suppose she means the Muslims. Whether we're influenced by our small parish or by Carl Schmitt, whether ignorant or extremely learned, many of us need to make up our own plague-spreaders.

I am often surprised how often many philosophers need to be reminded of something that, paraphrasing Hamlet, sounds like: There are more politics in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy.

When I say I'm convinced that this epidemic will produce far greater economic calamities (a crisis like in 2008?) than medical ones, I place myself within an optimistic perspective, which could be disproved in the next days.

And as from tomorrow, I too, though chuckling somewhat, will try to be a good citizen. I will avoid certain public places, I won't shake hands of persons I'll meet. I live in Rome, and I will not visit friends in the North and I will discourage them from coming to see me<sup>[3]</sup>.

After all, the effects of this epidemic will strengthen a tendency that would have in any case prevailed, and of which "working remotely" or "wfh", working from home and avoiding the office, is only one aspect. It will be less and less common for us to wake up in the morning and board public or private vehicles to reach the workplace; more and more we will work on our computers from our homes, which will also become our offices. And thanks to the Amazon and Netflix revolutions, we will no longer need to go out to do the shopping or to theatres to see movies, nor to buy books in bookshops: stores and bookshops (alas) will disappear and everything will be done from home. Life will become "hearted" or "homeized" (we already need to start thinking up neologisms). Schools too will disappear: with the use of devices like Skype, students will be able to attend their teachers' lessons from home. This generalized seclusion caused by the epidemic (or rather, by attempts to prevent it) will become our habitual way of life.



**1]** The figure has increased to 3652. Until now there are 107,000 ascertained cases and 61,000 recoveries (8 March 2020)[editors' update]

**2]** The number of fatalities in Italy has risen to 250 (8 March 2020) [editors' update]

**3]** A resolution made obsolete by the government ordinance effectively sealing off part of Northern Italy (8 March 2020). [editors' update]

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08/03/2020

## **The Community of the Forsaken: A Response to Agamben and Nancy**

*Divya Dwivedi and Shaj Mohan*

(in collaboration with the Journal "Antinomie", <https://antinomie.it/>)

India has for long been full of exceptional peoples, making meaningless the notion of "state of exception" or of "extending" it. Brahmins are exceptional for they alone can command the rituals that run the social order and they cannot be touched by the lower caste peoples (let alone desired) for fear of ritualistic pollution. In modern times this involves separate public toilets for them, in some instances. The Dalits, the lowest castes peoples too cannot be touched by the upper castes, let alone desired, because they are considered the most 'polluting'. As we can see, the exception of the Brahmin is unlike the exclusion of the Dalit. One of the Dalit castes named "Pariah" was turned into a 'paradigm' by Arendt, which unfortunately lightened the reality of their suffering. In 1896, when the bubonic plague entered Bombay, the British colonial administration tried to combat the spread of the disease using the Epidemic Diseases Act of 1897. However, caste barriers, including the demand by the upper castes to have separate hospitals and their refusal to receive medical assistance from the lower caste peoples among the medical personnel, added to causes of the deaths of more than ten million people in India.

The spread of coronavirus<sup>[1]</sup>, which has infected more than 100,000 people according to official figures, reveals what we wonder about ourselves today—are we worth saving, and at what cost? On the one hand there are the conspiracy theories which include "bioweapons" and a global project to bring down migration. On the other hand, there are troublesome misunderstandings, including the belief that COVID-19 is something propagated through "corona beer", and the racist commentaries on the Chinese people. But of an even greater concern is that, at this con-juncture of the death of god and birth of mechanical god, we have been persisting in a crisis about the "worth" of man. It can be seen in the responses to the crises of climate, technological 'exuberance', and coronavirus.

Earlier, man gained his worth through various *theo-technologies*. For example, one could imagine that the creator and creature were the determinations of something prior, say "being", where the former was *infinite* and the latter *finite*. In such a division one could think of god as the *infinite man* and man as the *finite god*. In the name of the *infinite man* the *finite gods* gave the ends to themselves. Today, we are entrusting the machine with the determination of ends, so that its domain can be called *techno-theology*.

It is in this peculiar con-juncture that one must consider Giorgio Agamben's recent remark that the containment measures against COVID-19 are being used as an "exception" to allow an extraordinary expansion of the governmental powers of imposing extraordinary restrictions on our



freedoms. That is, the measures taken by most states and at considerable delay, to prevent the spread of a virus that can potentially kill at least one percent of the human population, could implement the next level of “exception”. Agamben asks us to choose between “the exception” and the regular while his concern is with the regularization of exception.[2] Jean-Luc Nancy has since responded to this objection by observing that there are only exceptions today, that is, everything we once considered regular is broken-through[3]. Deleuze in his final text would refer to that which calls to us at the end of all the games of regularities and exceptions as “a life”;<sup>[4]</sup> that is, one is seized by responsibility when one is confronted with an individual life which is in the seizure of death. *Death and responsibility go together.*

Then let us attend to the non-exceptionality of exceptions. Until the late 1800s, pregnant women admitted in hospitals tended to die in large numbers after giving birth due to puerperal fever, or post-partum infections. At a certain moment, an Austrian physician named Ignaz Semmelweis realized that it was because the hands of medical workers carried pathogens from one autopsy to the next patient, or from one woman’s womb to the next’s, causing infections and death. The solution proposed by Semmelweis was to wash hands after each contact. For this he was treated as an exception and ostracized by the medical community. He died in a mental asylum suffering from septicemia, which resulted possibly from the beating of the guards. Indeed, there are unending senses of exceptions. In Semmelweis’ case, the very technique for combating infection was the exception. In *Politics*, Aristotle discussed the case of the exceptional man, such as the one who could sing better than the chorus, who would be ostracized for being a god amongst men.

There is not one paradigm of exception. The pathway of one microbial pathology is different from that of another. For example, the staphylococci live within human bodies without causing any difficulties, although they trigger infections when our immune system response is “excessive”. At the extreme of non-pathological relations, the chloroplasts in plant cells and the mitochondria in the cells of our bodies are ancient, well-settled cohabitations between different species. Above all, viruses and bacteria do not “intend” to kill their host, for it is not always in their “interest”<sup>[5]</sup> to destroy that through which alone they could survive. In the long term—of millions of years of nature’s time—“everything learns to live with each other”, or at least obtain equilibria with one another for long periods. This is the biologist’s sense of nature’s temporality.

In recent years, due in part to farming practices, micro-organisms which used to live apart came together and started exchanging genetic material, sometimes just fragments of DNA and RNA. When these organisms made the “jump” to human beings, disasters sometimes began for us. Our immune systems find these new entrants shocking and then tend to overplay their resources by developing inflammations and fevers which often kill both us *and* the micro-organisms. Etymologically “virus”<sup>[6]</sup> is related to poison. It is poison in the sense that by the time a certain new virus finds a negotiated settlement with human animals we will be long gone. That is, everything can be thought in the model of the “pharmakon” (both poison and cure) if we take nature’s time. However, the distinction between medicine and poison in most instances pertains to the time of humans, the uncanny animal. What is termed “biopolitics” takes a stand from the assumption of the nature’s temporality, and thus neglects what is disaster in the view of our interest in – our responsibility for – “a life”, that is, the lives of everyone in danger of dying from contracting the virus.

Here lies the crux of the problem: we have been able to determine the “interests” of our immune systems by constituting exceptions in nature, including through the Semmelweis method of hand washing and vaccinations. Our kind of animal does not have biological epochs at its disposal in order to perfect each intervention. Hence, we too, like nature, make coding errors and mutations in nature, responding to each and every exigency in ways we best can. As Nancy noted, man as this technical-exception-maker who is uncanny to himself was thought from very early on by Sophocles in his ode to man. Correspondingly, unlike nature’s time, humans are concerned with *this moment*, which must be led to the next moment with the feeling that *we are the forsaken*: those who are cursed to ask after “the why” of their being but without having the means to ask it. Or, as Nancy qualified it in a personal correspondence, “*forsaken by nothing*”. The power of this “forsakenness” is unlike the abandonments constituted by the absence of particular things with respect to each other. This forsakenness demands, as we found with Deleuze, that we attend to each life as

precious, while knowing at the same time that in the communities of the forsaken we can experience the call of the forsaken individual life which we alone can attend to. Elsewhere, we have called the experience of this call of the forsaken, and the possible emergence of its community from out of metaphysics and hypophysics, “anastasis”.<sup>[7]</sup>

*Divya Dwivedi and Shaj Mohan (philosophers based in the subcontinent).*

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[1] Coincidentally, the name of the virus ‘corona’ means ‘crown’, the metonymy of sovereignty.

[2] Which of course has been perceived as a non-choice by most governments since 2001 in order to securitize all social relations in the name of terrorism. The tendency notable in these cases is that the securitization of the state is proportionate to corporatization of nearly all state functions.

[3] See Jean-Luc Nancy, *L’Intrus* (Paris: Galilée, 2000).

[4] See Gilles Deleuze, “L’immanence: une vie”, in *Philosophie* 47 (1995).

[5] It is ridiculous to attribute an interest to a micro-organism, and the clarifications could take much more space than this intervention allows. At the same time, today it is impossible to determine the “interest of man”.

[6] We should note that “viruses” exist on the critical line between living and non-living.

[7] In Shaj Mohan and Divya Dwivedi, *Gandhi and Philosophy: On Theological Anti-Politics*, foreword by Jean-Luc Nancy (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019).

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14/03/2020

### **The virtues of the virus**

*Rocco Ronchi*

It is difficult to resist the temptation of analogy when trying to make sense of the proportions of the pandemic event. In the reflections that accompany its uncontrolled spread, Covid 19 has become a sort of generalized metaphor, almost the symbolic precipitate of the human condition in post-modernity. What happened forty years ago, with HIV, is repeating itself today. The pandemic appears as a sort of *experimentum crucis*, able to test hypotheses that go from politics to the effects of globalization, to the transformation of communication at the time of the internet – reaching the heights of the finest metaphysical speculation. The isolation, the mistrust and suspicion the virus causes, make it alternatively “populist” and “sovereignist”. The emergency measures it forces upon us seem to universalize the “state of exception” that the present has inherited from the political theology of the twentieth century, confirming Foucault’s thesis that modern sovereign power is biopolitical (a power that is articulated in the production, management and administration of “life”). Also, because of the fundamental anonymity characterizing it, the virus seems to share the same immaterial quality that grounds the dominion of financial capitalism. Because of how contagious it is, it can be easily compared to the prereflexive and “viral” nature of online communication. Last but not least, the virus signals our eternal human condition. In case we have forgotten that we are mortal, finite, contingent, lacking, ontological wanting, etc., the virus is here to remind us, forcing us to meditate and correct our distraction, that of compulsive consumers. These considerations are legitimate. They are, in fact, perfectly justified. This is,

however, also their defect. If they make sense, it is precisely because they reduce what is unknown to what is known. They use the virus as intuitive proof that responds – to speak in phenomenological terms – to an expectation that is theoretical. For the critical insight that is being developed around the virus, Covid 19 is rather the name of a science fiction film used to certify previous knowledge.

However, if it is true that the virus displays the characteristic of an event (it would be difficult to deny this), then it must also possess its “virtue”. Events are such not because they “happen” or, at least, not only because of this. Events are not “facts”. Unlike simple facts, events possess a “virtue”, a force, a property, a *vis*, that is, they do something. For this reason, an event is always traumatic to the point we may say that if there is no trauma there is no event, that if there is no trauma, literally nothing has happened. What exactly do events do? Events produce transformations that prior to their taking place were not even possible. In fact, they only begin to be “after” the event has taken place. In short, an event is such because it generates “real” possibility. One must bear in mind that here “possible” merely means doable. Possibility means being able to do something. Possibility is nothing abstract, it is not the free imagination of other worlds that are better than this one. Remaining on a pragmatic level, without indulging in metaphysics, possibility is only “potency” and potency is nothing more than action, determined activity. The “virtue” of an event thus consists in rendering operational methods possible, methods that “before” were simply impossible, unthinkable. It follows that an event can only be thought of starting from the future it generates (and not from the past), because it transforms, because it creates that which is real, and with it possibility. Common sense is therefore right when an event is thought of as an “opportunity” to “make a virtue of necessity”.

We are too close to the Covid 19 event to be able to catch a glimpse of the future it bears, our fear is human, and this makes us unreliable witnesses. However, some signs of the shift in paradigm that this virus is generating are already visible, and they display an unexpected sense. The most striking is probably the sudden disappearance of the ideology linked to “walls”. The virus has come at a time when the planet seemed to converge towards the shared belief that the only response to the “threats” posed by globalization consists in redefining guarded borders and strong identities. Populism hates books, but it dogmatically believes in the primacy of “culture”, understood in an anthropological sense. The kind of community it promotes is, in fact, historical, romantic and traditional. This community is local by definition, its sworn enemy is the frigid abstraction of cosmopolitanism. What is even more alien in the eyes of populism is nature, which is nothing other than a resource to be exploited for the well-being of the community (one need only think of Bolsonaro and the deforestation in the Amazon, of Trump and his indifference to global warming, of Salvini’s hatred for Greta...). Populists never doubt the idea that humanity is “exceptional”. On the contrary, it is an article of faith. I might add that if a populist kisses the cross, it is because this act theologically confirms this exception. In a matter of days, and with an incredible speed, the virus has forced us all, willingly or not, to take upon ourselves – with everyday actions (wash your hands...) – the destiny of the global community, and, what is more, the destiny of the community of man with nature. Our culturalist and anthropocentric prejudice was not overcome by the slow and almost always ineffective action of education: a cough was enough to make it suddenly impossible to evade the responsibility that each individual has towards all living beings for the simple fact of (still...) being part of this world, and of wanting to be part of it...

With the objective force of trauma, the virus shows that the whole is always implied in the part, that “everything is, in certain sense, in everything” and that in nature there are no autonomous regions that constitute an exception. In nature there is no “dominion within another”, as Spinoza wrote, ridiculing the “spirit’s” claims to superiority over “matter”. The virus’s monism is wild and its immanence cruel. If culture de-solidarizes, if it erects barriers and constructs genres, if it defines gradations in the participation in the notion of humanity, tracing horrible borders between “us” and the “barbarians”, the virus connects, and forces us to search for common solutions. Nobody, at a time like this, can think it is possible to save oneself on one’s own, nor is it possible to do this without involving nature in this process. It is said that the epidemic is leading to the creation of red

zones, domestic seclusion, the militarization of territories. This is indeed the case. Here, however, the wall has a completely different meaning compared to the walls the rich build to keep out the poor. A wall is being erected for the other, whoever she or he may be. In times like these “thy neighbour” is radically reduced to the dimension of “anyone”. A wall, in all its forms, including the one metre separating the people standing in bars, is erected to substitute handshakes, now impossible, with that “anyone”. It is a means to communicate, not the sign of exclusion. This is confirmed by the fact that the fascist rhetoric has not been able to appropriate these walls and use them to say how right they were about their proposals for segregation. In the face of the immense power of this virus, the fascists have had to put away, at least momentarily, their most effective weapon.

We are too close to the event also to be able to evaluate the effects it will have on the political sphere. There is one fact, however, that must be noted. The virus seems to restore the primacy that once belonged to the political. Classical thought used a metaphor to convey this primacy, the image of a ship’s pilot navigating through stormy seas. Thinkers of the past were realists, they knew that there were no safe harbours to enter and end one’s journey. Navigation, they said, is necessary, life is not. The “element” washing the political is a kind of nature in which fortune, chance and risk play an ineradicable role. Political “virtue”, in fact, consisted in testing the force of this element, governing it with cunning intelligence (*metis*) and resilience. The political is such precisely because it renounces the “human, all too human” illusion that it is possible to appropriate the force of natural elements, an illusion which, on the contrary, constitutes the metaphysical dream of “modern” humanity, which has conceived of the relationship with nature as a war of the spirit against brute matter. Political primacy means governing nature, not dominating it. Also, to explicit the fully “political” nature of this government, it is important to recall the formula so dear to Plato: *kata dynamin*, as much as it is possible for a human. Undoubtedly it is precisely the hypothesis of dominion that is ridiculed by a cough in Wuhan, a cough that makes it necessary to apply the pragmatic intelligence of a ship’s pilot to govern, as much as possible, the spontaneity of a process unfolding against our intentions. Covid 19 also possesses this virtue: it commands politics to take on its specific responsibility, it returns the primacy that politics had delusionally left to other sovereign spheres, becoming subordinate to them, declaring its own powerlessness and limiting itself to playing an exclusively technical role. Following Wuhan the agenda can only be set by politics, which must navigate through the stormy seas of a progressive and apparently unstoppable contagion (indeed the Greeks described political virtue as being “cybernetic”, that is, nautical). Indeed what until a few weeks ago seemed to be an unrealistic claim has now become a watchword. Politics must have precedence over the economy. It is the latter that must yield to the needs of the Prince who cares about the destiny of his crew.

Finally, the virus invites us to meditate. I do not think, however, that the object of this meditation is the contingency of being and the precarious nature of human affairs. We certainly do not need Covid 19 to reflect on our fragility. This anxiety has never really disappeared (despite what the journalist in their studios keep saying, when they pontificate about how thanks to the virus humanity, made stupid by the media, so by them, has finally “rediscovered” its ontological insecurity). The virus rather articulates existence, ours and that of others, as “destiny”. Suddenly we feel we are being dragged by something that is overpowering, which grows in the silence of our organs, ignoring our will. Is freedom compromised to such an extent? This idea of freedom is certainly mediocre if it conflicts with the inevitability of what takes place. Among the virtues of the virus, we must also mention its ability to generate a more sober idea of freedom: the freedom achieved in doing something about what destiny does to us. To be free is to do what must be done in a specific situation. This is not philosophical abstraction. We see it embodied in the efforts that people make, the earnestness and dedication with which thousands of people work daily to slow the spread of the infection.

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**Giorgio Agamben**

***Clarifications***

17/03/2020

An Italian journalist applied himself, according to the best practice of his profession, to distorting and falsifying my considerations on the ethical confusion into which the epidemic is throwing the country, where there is no longer even any respect for the dead. In the same way as it's not worth mentioning his name, it's not worth rectifying his predictable manipulations. Those who wish to do so may read my text *Contagion* on the Quodlibet publishers website. Instead, I would rather publish here some further reflections, which, despite their clarity, will presumably be falsified too.

Fear is a bad counsellor, but it makes us see many things we pretended not to see. The first thing the wave of panic that's paralysed the country has clearly shown is that our society no longer believes in anything but naked life. It is evident that Italians are prepared to sacrifice practically everything – normal living conditions, social relations, work, even friendships and religious or political beliefs – to avoid the danger of falling ill. The naked life, and the fear of losing it, is not something that brings men and women together, but something that blinds and separates them. Other human beings, like those in the plague described by Manzoni, are now seen only as potential contaminators to be avoided at all costs or at least to keep at a distance of at least one metre. The dead – our dead – have no right to a funeral and it's not clear what happens to the corpses of our loved ones. Our fellow humans have been erased and it's odd that the Churches remain silent on this point. What will human relations become in a country that will be accustomed to living in this way for who knows how long? And what is a society with no other value other than survival? The other thing, no less disturbing than the first, is that the epidemic is clearly showing that the state of exception, which governments began to accustom us to years ago, has become an authentically normal condition. There have been more serious epidemics in the past, but no one ever thought of declaring a state of emergency like today, one that forbids us even to move. Men have become so used to living in conditions of permanent crisis and emergency that they don't seem to notice that their lives have been reduced to a purely biological condition, one that has lost not only any social and political dimension, but even any compassionate and emotional one. A society that lives in a permanent state of emergency cannot be a free one. We effectively live in a society that has sacrificed freedom to so-called "security reasons" and as a consequence has condemned itself to living in a permanent state of fear and insecurity. It's not surprising that we talk about the virus in terms of a war. The emergency provisions effectively force us to live under a curfew. But a war against an invisible enemy that can nestle in any other human being is the most absurd of wars. It is, to be truthful, a civil war. The enemy isn't somewhere outside, it's inside us.

What's worrying is not so much the present, not only the present at least, but the aftermath. In the same way as the legacies of wars on peacetime have included a whole range of nefarious technologies, from barbed wire to nuclear plants, so it is very likely that there will be attempts to carry on pursuing, even after the medical emergency is over, many of the experiments governments hadn't been able to implement: may universities and schools remain shut, with lessons and lectures taking place online, may an end be put once and for all to meetings and gathering to talk about political and cultural questions, may we only exchange digital messages and may wherever possible machines replace any contact – any contagion – between human beings.

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**Sergio Benvenuto**

***Forget about Agamben***

The immediate reaction of the sovereignists – an ennobling euphemism to define neo-fascists – to the coronavirus pandemic was the reflex we would all have expected from xenophobes: closing borders and identifying Covid-19 with the Foreigner. It's what Trump did by blocking communications with Europe without doing anything at the domestic level. The danger is always from the outside, never from within.

It was said that this pandemic would have pulled the rug from under the feet of the neo-fascists (among whom I include Trump, Johnson, Salvini, Erdogan...). Indeed, in cases in which anyone can be infected, the danger is not from the outside – Africa, China, Muslims, and so on – and not even from another nameable and circumscribable group from within, one that can be isolated like the Jews were for centuries in Europe. The danger lies everywhere, even in a child, a grandparent, a lover.... As the journalist Massimo Giannini said, "We are not in danger, we are the danger." The basic signifying oppositions of our Schmittian being political animals – us versus them, me versus the other – collapse and we're all equally dangerous, the gipsy is no more dangerous than my own daughter, racist categorizations lose all their mobilising charm at a stroke.

Within this picture, it doesn't worry me that the various countries have suspended Schengen. It would have been more disturbing had there been a closure of each country against another, but in fact it's just another of many closures at all levels: each citizen closes him or herself to the other.

The eminent philosopher Giorgio Agamben writes (in this same Tribune):

Even sadder than the limitations on freedom implicit in the provisions is, in my opinion, the degeneration of human relations they can generate. The other man, whoever he may be, even a loved one, must not be approached or touched, and indeed it is necessary to keep a specific distance from him, which according to some should be of one metre, but according to the latest recommendations by experts should be of 4.5 metres (interesting to note those extra fifty centimetres!) Our fellow man has been abolished.

It is difficult to imagine an equally superficial reaction. In fact the epidemic overturns the cliché that if I love my fellow men or women I should hug them, kiss them or stick to them like sardines ... Today I display my love for the other by keeping her or him at a distance. This is the paradox that collapses all the lazy ideological frameworks (ideological not in the Marxist sense) of the left and right, not to mention of the populists.

The edifying propaganda of some politicians and the media appeals to our selfishness as well as to our altruism: "If you avoid others, you are protecting them, but yourself too." Now, very often this is by no means true. It is now common knowledge that young people can be infected like everyone else but that it's quite rare for them to fall ill; it's also common knowledge that this pandemic is a geronticide, that those really at risk are the over 65s.

A young friend of mine keeps me at a distance of at least three meters and smiles. I very much appreciate this non-gesture of his, because I know that it is mainly he who is trying to protect me; because I'm old. It's true that he's also protecting the elderly in his own family: his father, his mother... But in any case I'm grateful to him. The more the others keep at a distance from me, the closer I feel to them. This is why Agamben has failed to understand anything about what's happening in the *molecularity* of human relations.

On the contrary, in recent days I came across several people who did not respect this secure distance and didn't even wear gloves or face masks; and they expressed their scepticism on the gravity of the disease... I could gather from their arguments that they were basically cynical and ultimately antisocial individuals. Today the sociable avoid society.

Last winter 8000 people died in Italy as a consequence of lung complications due to influenza, mostly the elderly. This year, with coronavirus, the death rate will probably rise to something between 20 and 25 thousand, three times the "normal" number of victims, mostly among the elderly. Is the fact that "only" three times as many people die because of a seasonal illness enough to say that Agamben is right in saying that this is a fake epidemic? No. Because this is an unknown virus that could have even more disastrous consequences. Everything that's being done is merely preventive. And, above all: in our societies it is unacceptable that three times as many people as normal die in one winter. It's a biopolitical – that is, ethical – choice.

A grotesque clown like Boris Johnson told the British people to "prepare to lose loved ones before their time". But why not address the dying too? Why not say "prepare to lose your lives"? As if death were always the death of the other. Perhaps he meant "prepare to lose your elderly...." For BoJo those who will die, those who have all the ingredients for death, also lose the quality of addressees, they're no longer even a "you". Italy made a different choice: quarantine and economic paralysis to protect its senior citizens. Among them we also find Agamben, born in 1942. I sense something of the heroic in this vigorous defence of those who do not have long to live.

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**Massimo De Carolis**

***The threat of contagion***

Now that the media storm sparked by the coronavirus is beginning to subside, finally letting some reasonably certain data emerge, while the entire national territory is subjected to a regime of "exceptionality" never experienced before, it is possible to put forward some considerations on how the biological sphere and political one are intertwined in the current emergency, without fear of confusing the two spheres and thus contributing to the general confusion.

The first fact that appears to be incontestable is the exponential rate with which hospitalizations and deaths increase, doubling in number every two or three days. In short, the epidemic is not an illusion, but a real fact, an epidemic able to bring the hospital system to the brink within a couple of weeks, with dramatic social consequences in regions such as Campania or Sicily, where the health care system is already under strain in normal conditions, for much more futile causes.

Conversely, a much more reassuring fact, though not entirely certain, is that the number of people who have contracted the virus with mild symptoms may be much higher than what actual checks show. In short, it is possible that the virus is less lethal and that the number of infections will start dropping sooner than we think, as positive data from China confirm. It is therefore reasonable to hope that the epidemic will eventually end, without causing millions of deaths the way the Spanish or the Asian flu did.

Obviously, hopes are higher because of the greater efficiency of health technologies and systems compared to the past. It is, however, more difficult to measure the effectiveness of the policy measures adopted. The impression is that they are inspired by a principle of common sense. Theoretically, if in Italy no one ever came close to anyone else in the following three weeks (if, absurdly, wives and husbands stopped sleeping together, parents no longer hugged their children



and doctors stayed away from patients), it would be impossible for the contagion to spread and the emergency would cease. The government measures seem to aim at this ideal situation as much as possible. Their goal is, if not to cancel social life, at least suspend it until further notice, relying on remote technology such as social networks and smart working for communication. The reasoning behind these measures, whether it is right or wrong, appears to be shared by the vast majority of the population, which is adapting to the new rules with surprising zeal. Certainly not everyone thinks that kids gathering to celebrate a birthday, or elderly who insist on having a coffee in a bar, despite these measures, are irresponsible “criminals”. But certainly, at the moment, obedience to the rules is strengthened by strong social disapproval of the offenders. Therefore demanding the mitigation or even a suspension of these measures would be, at the moment, a futile and unpopular move, especially since no one seems to have a viable alternative. The fact remains, however, that these measures are disturbing, they dissolve the social bond and impose a regime of solitude and police control on the whole population, a strong reminder of the darkest experiences of our recent political past. The crucial point is therefore to understand whether this is really and *only* a simple parenthesis, or if we are rather witnessing a general test of what could become the condition of ordinary life in the societies of the near future. This doubt is justified by the fact that the destruction of the social bond and obsessive control in the name of “public health” certainly did not originate with the coronavirus. For at least a century, modern social mechanisms have tended to generate a society based on isolation, in which the spontaneity of social life is perceived as an obstacle or even as a threat to the stability of the system. The point is that in the past the production system could not function without bodies, voices and hands working together: it could limit and control promiscuity but not eliminate it entirely. Today, on the contrary, all this is possible, thanks to the wonders of technology. For the first time, despite how paradoxical this may sound, the machine reproducing society can completely eliminate human sociality, without paying too high a price. What guarantees that this is not what is being tested for the future?

To avoid misunderstandings, let us make it clear that in no case will a conspiracy, a Spectre or some more or less occult personification of Power, answer this question. There is no director behind social phenomena, these are the result of a varying number of independent forces and drives. There are no puppeteers, only puppets animating the theatre, each in his or her own way, with more or less force, in one direction or another, often in spite of their conscious intentions. When the epidemic is over, there will certainly be a festive return to sociality, which no democratic government will dream of prohibiting. Certainly, however, many companies will decide that smart working is convenient, and will ask employees not to dismantle the emergency workstations they have arranged in their bedrooms. Many conformist people will notice that the closure of nightlife venues is an advantage for public safety, provided it does not harm the interests of restaurants and tourism. Also, many “identitarian” political forces will remind us that contagion, in general, spreads among homeless people and immigrants in particular (although unfortunately not in this case) and that the public health system requires unyielding hygiene. More in general, all of us will discover that, ultimately, there is no social life that does not involve risk of contagion, just as there is no organic life that does not involve the risk of disease and death. For this reason we will have to address a basic political question: to what extent are we willing to jeopardize, also minimally, our biological security to have dinner with a friend, to embrace a child or simply to chat with the people hanging around in the square? Where do we place the bar when deciding that our social happiness has precedence over safeguarding our health? Is political existence more important than biological survival?

The fact that the coronavirus is forcing us to ask these questions from one day to the next is a good thing, because the structure of our future society may depend on the answers we provide *with facts* (not only words).

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**Shaj Mohan**

***What Carries Us On***

*It is frightfully sublime in part because of its obscurity.* – Immanuel Kant

Implicit within the debate on Coronavirus curated by *Antinomie* and archived by Sergio Benvenuto[1] is the question—*for what must we carry on?* That is, do we—humanity, which has been reckoned by many thinkers as the error in nature—carry on for the sake of carrying on? Or, should we, following Thomas Taylor, M. K. Gandhi, Pierre Clastres, and several others, proceed with a project of returning towards a moment in history that, for Agamben, is “the normal conditions of life”[2]. Is not Agamben’s notion of normal life none other than a mythical European bourgeois idyll where “the churches” do not “remain silent”? Should we continue to evaluate everything in our present with these “normal conditions of life”?

These conversations have been happening in America too, where “the boomers”—those few of a post-war generation who enjoyed prosperity and *relatively stable* conditions of life—evaluates the lives of “millennials” on the basis of its own myths and idylls. Wittgenstein distinguished the philosopher from the bourgeois thinker who thinks “with the aim of clearing up the affairs of some particular community”. It is impossible to avoid the fact that the “normal conditions of life” to be guarded from “biopolitics” were, and are, dependent on colonial, capitalistic, and other exploitative processes which all these families of thoughts including the theory of “bio-politics” seek to criticise. Since the notions of “normalcy” and “biopolitics” held by Agamben, and derived from Michel Foucault, have been exported through analogy over regions of the world and of thought that are homologically distinct, a certain “bourgeois thinking” has become the universal today. In many parts of the world these theories provide the experience of a conspiratorial spirit in history determining its course, leaving humans to merely lament, which is our sense of “resistance” today.

The terror before this question—*for what must we carry on?*—was always understood and it is not limited to any epoch or region. The closing off of this question has been mostly the work of what we call “religions”. However, it began to acquire an urgency with Nietzsche’s destruction of all values towards a revaluation of all values. Nietzsche pointed to an obscure object of thought as the reference for the revaluation of all values—*eternal return of the same*. Martin Heidegger would execute a certain act in philosophy in 1934 which would then suppress the import of the question *for what must we carry on* in a lecture course titled “Logic as the Question Concerning the Essence of Language”. In this lecture, long before Foucault and Agamben, Heidegger specified a certain form of politics—“population politics”—which considers people with indifference to their blood-lines and ‘tongue-lines’. He wrote,

In a census, the *Volk* is counted in the sense of the population, the population, in so far as it constitutes the body of the *Volk*, the inhabitants of the land. At the same time, it is to be considered that in a governmental *order* of the census a certain part of the *Volk* is included, namely the part that dwells within the State’s borders. The German nationals living abroad are not included in the count, [they] do not belong in this sense to the *Volk*. On the other hand, those can also be included in the count, *those who, taken racially, are of alien breed, do not belong to the Volk*. [3]

Here, population refers to something of a “motley crew”, whereas the ideal type for “a people” are those dwellers of the soil who once enjoyed a mythic unity with one another. Here is a German bourgeois thinker.

If we assume that this tendency of the last century is “Eurocentric” it will be a grave error. In fact, its most profound and startling expression can be found in the subcontinent. M. K. Gandhi too conceived an Indian village idyll and contrasted it with “western civilization”. Gandhi’s idyll is the village of the privileged upper caste Indian under whom the racial hierarchies and exploitations of the majority lower caste people carry on, but without an ounce of resentment on part of the exploited. The logic of surrendering to the caste order without resentment in the subcontinent is called “Karman”[4]. Gandhi understood that this ideal was never realised in history, and never will be.

However, Gandhi's evaluation of mankind was not founded on the ideal village as the "normal conditions". Instead, the village itself was founded on the principles of hypophysics, according to which nature is the good. We had called this mode of thinking hypophysics following Kant's taxonomy of moral thought[5]. The ideal Indian village is the home of hypophysics where all things are retained at their original value, that is, a place where nature was never de-natured. The ideal village conserves the "normal conditions" in spite of the presence of man. Gandhi's verdict was that man was infected with a range of faculties that allowed him to explore all the milieus given in nature and also propelled him to discover the milieus unknown to nature. The being without an appropriate milieu is the effervescent error in nature. If a being cannot be given a fixed milieu then what is good and bad for it are also indefinable. That is, action in the moral sense is impossible for such a being, who must therefore seek its own dissolution in nature.

As we know Gandhi's goal in life was to reduce himself to "zero", a point at which no action was required. As with all rigorous thinkers, he sought the same end for humankind itself—we *must not carry on*. Gandhi's advice to Martin Buber on the fate of the Jewish people in Nazi Germany came from his interpretation of "for what must we carry on". When Gandhi was requested by Buber to intervene on behalf of the Jewish people using his considerable moral standing in the world, he responded:

The calculated violence of Hitler may even result in a general massacre of the Jews by way of his first answer to the declaration of such hostilities. But if the Jewish mind could be prepared for voluntary suffering, even the massacre I have imagined could be turned into a day of thanksgiving and joy that Jehovah had wrought *deliverance of the race* even at the hands of the tyrant. For to the godfearing, death has no terror.[6]

The schema of this response, shocking as it is, continues to reign over our time. What holds the schema together is hypophysics, and the theory of "bio-politics" is itself a species of hypophysics.

Today, the dominance of this tendency—hypophysics—is not to be scorned upon without understanding the conditions in which it arose. Hypophysics came to be dominant when metaphysics became impossible; that is, instead of referring to another domain for values we began to find the Ideal within our preferred socio-economic milieus and in the calamitous misunderstandings of nature. We became acutely aware of the absence of "value" and hence a certain inability to distinguish between good and evil in the last century. We must note that this aversion of the eye from the absence of value, which makes one hold fast to the nearest ideal or idyll, is still a caring thought.

The formalisation of the experience of being without value, without an orientation in the face of the question "*for what must we carry on*", is most acutely found in the schema of Heidegger's early works[7]. In philosophy, difference is found in something which is differentiable. For example, we say that "1" and "a" differ in the differentiable "written characters". Duns Scotus' theology relies on thinking being as the ultimate differentiable in which God was the infinite being and creates the finite beings. This gives us something akin to *infinite man* and *finite gods* to work with. Being, in which the difference is made, gives man his orientation in God. The similarity between the logic of this division in being and the theory of Idea in Plato's middle period made Nietzsche remark that Christianity was Platonism for the masses.

Heidegger would propose a new kind of difference without precedence—ontico-ontological difference or the difference between *being* and *beings*—for which there is no differentiable. From this moment, being could not be thought as something that is the primary differentiable, nor could it be thought as the place holder for the higher beings—Idea, Subject, Will—for there is no primary differentiable. Heidegger's unthinkable logic would open the mystery of being itself and at the same time keep in abeyance the unthinkable through the narrative of the decline in the history of the difference between being and beings. In this narrative, there once was an ideal village in Greece where "normal conditions of living" were available.

Jean-Luc Nancy pursued and revealed the limits of this thought when he wrote the obscure proposition "*existence precedes and succeeds upon itself*"[8]. It stands outside the family of propositions such as "existence precedes essence" and "essence precedes existence", and it

implies at least two things. First, reason can be given for the succession of each thing upon itself and of a thing upon another thing. However, there is no reason, under any other names, for the persistence of existence. Second, we can determine our actions, or our movement from moment to moment, through reason which drives this movement in spite of us. However, we are abandoned in the face of the moment itself, which does not submit to reason. That is, the *duratio noumenon* is properly obscure. The world wraps around us with its intrigues of reason while at the same time reason itself drives us towards the absence of itself in the fact of reason, a seizure from which one cannot shake free.

In a series of proper names—Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Derrida, Deleuze, Nancy—and through different logics and systematicities, we have come to an acute understanding of this fact: that we are *forsaken*. But what does it imply, especially now when we are seeking an orientation in the face of an epidemic, and then other calamities? In a short text with the least formal steps something can still be indicated and shared. Anticipation is when we say that “there is lighting, and thunder is set to follow”. When several elements are involved in the constitution of a phenomenon our anticipations are likely to meet with disappointment or surprise; for example, a concert may be cancelled due to an earthquake. The moments, and the relation between the moments, which we can account for through reason can fall within the experience of anticipation; that is, everything in the world. However, there is something outside anticipation—the persistence of the world—which we embrace with the absolute certainty that its disappearance with us in it is never a concern, although we know that “a world” of a “someone” will withdraw, including our own. In each step of anticipations and disappointments we are surprised by this disorienting certitude. If we bring Kant and Wittgenstein together *the end of the world is not an event, for it is not an event in the world*.

This absolute certitude is the most obscure experience, while also being the most distinct. Like a membrane it envelops everything while penetrating everything as we look into everything. Early Wittgenstein’s experience of this mystery was that of the individual who in his solitude experienced the sense of the world lying outside it while the being of the world itself was for that very reason obscure. But what we can say, for now, is that this experience of the obscure—the assurance of an absolute persistence—is possible on the condition that we are able to speak with one another in sharing our reasons and responsibilities. Later Wittgenstein would argue that the possibility of each experience is public, for there is no private language. Then, each one of us, without knowing the whence and whither of it, share the obscure because we can share words, cultures, love, cautions and tragedies.

From the experience of the obscure we should think of the other side of hypophysics, which is technological determinism. It is the same aversion from the obscure experience that turns us towards technological exuberance where a new god is being founded—the hyper-machines that will make machines which humans can neither build nor comprehend. It will be these machines that will then give ends to man. Bio-politics and other theories are rendering us immobile and resigned like animals who are caught in the headlights, but of our own rushing technical exuberance.

Tonight we should rest a while in our shared solitude (the only kind of solitude as we can see) with the thought that the mystery is not that the world is, but that it is mysterious to us *making of us the mystery*, the obscure “mysterium tremendum”. In the words of the poet tonight we are “*Alive in the Superunknown*”.

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[1] See “Coronavirus and Philosophers” <https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/coronavirus-and-philosophers/>

And <https://antinomie.it>

[2] See Giorgio Agamben on coronavirus: “The enemy is not outside, it is within us.” <http://bookhaven.stanford.edu/2020/03/giorgio-agamben-on-coronavirus-the-enemy-is-not-outside->

it-is-within-us/

[3] Heidegger, *Logic as the Question Concerning the Essence of Language* (Buffalo: SUNY Press, 2009): p. 56, emphases added.

[4] See Giorgio Agamben, *Karman: A Brief Treatise on Action, Guilt, and Gesture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018).

[5] See Shaj Mohan and Divya Dwivedi, *Gandhi and Philosophy: On Theological Anti-Politics* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019, foreword by Jean-Luc Nancy).

[6] Ibid.

[7] Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Routledge, 1922) arrived at the absence of any kind of "for what" for us to "carry on" before Heidegger came into the scene, but it did so through a different logic.

[8] Jean-Luc Nancy, *Sense of the World*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997): p. 34.

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### Jean-Luc Nancy

#### *A Much Too Human Virus*

As it has often been said, since 1945 Europe has been exporting its wars. Having fallen apart, it was unable to do anything but spread its disunion through its old colonies, and along the lines of its alliances and competing interests with the new power poles of the world. Between these poles, Europe was only a memory, while still pretending to have a future.

And now, Europe is importing. Not only merchandise, as it has long done, but first and foremost populations – something that is not new either, but is becoming urgent, even overwhelming –, at a pace set by the conflicts it exports and by environmental problems (which also originated in Europe). Today, Europe is importing a viral epidemic.

What does this mean? It is not simply a question of the spread, which has its vectors and trajectories. Europe is not the centre of the world – far from it – but it persists in playing its long-standing role as a model or an example. Elsewhere, there may be very strong attractions and impressive opportunities. Some are traditional, perhaps old-fashioned, like in North America; others are newer, in Asia and Africa (with South America being a special case, where many European features are combined with other particularities). But Europe seemed, or believed itself to be, more or less desirable, at least as a refuge.

The old theatre of the exemplary – justice, science, democracy, beauty and well-being – attracts desires, even if these desires attach themselves to worn out or even outmoded objects. Thus, Europe stays open to visitors although it is not welcoming for those who can't pay for such desires. It is not surprising, then, that a virus enters the picture.

Nor is it surprising that in Europe this virus creates greater confusion than in the place of its origin. Indeed, China had already established order, in regard to markets as well as diseases. Europe, on the other hand, was in a state of relative disorder: between nations and between aspirations. This led to some indecision, agitation and difficult adaptation. By contrast, the United States immediately fell back on its grandiose isolationism and its unhesitating ability to decide. Europe has always been trying to find itself – and the world, which it kept discovering, exploring and exploiting –, after which still not knowing where it stood.

Just when the first epicentre of the pandemic seemed to have been brought under control, and many countries not yet affected closed their doors to Europeans and to the Chinese, Europe became the epicentre of the pandemic. It was there that we saw the accumulated effects of travel

to China (business, leisure, studies), of visitors from China and elsewhere (business, leisure, studies), of its own general uncertainties and, finally, of its internal dissention.

It would be tempting to resume the situation like this: in Europe it's "Run for your life" and elsewhere it's "Show me what you're made of, virus!". Or like this: in Europe, the dilly-dallying, the skepticism and the hard-headedness are more prevalent than in many other places. This is our "reasoning reason" legacy, libertine and libertarian; in other words, the legacy we, old Europeans, considered the very life of the mind.

This is why the inevitable reiteration of the expression "exceptional measures" resuscitates the ghost of Carl Schmitt, through a kind of hasty parallel. Thus, the virus spreads the discourses of ostentatious defiance. Showing that you are not fooled is more important than avoiding the contagion – which amounts to being doubly fooled – and perhaps by poorly repressed anxiety. Or by a childish feeling of omnipotence or daring.

Everyone (me included) has a comment to make, be it doubtful or attempting an interpretation. Philosophy, psychoanalysis and politology of the virus all have a message to bring.

(Let us accept the view presented by Michel Deguy, in his poem *Coronation*, on the Website of the journal *Po&sie*.)

Everyone wants to discuss and argue, since we are long used to dealing with difficulties, ignorance and undecidedness. At the global level, what dominates, it seems to me, are confidence, mastery and decision. At least, this is the image that seems to emerge, or to take shape in the collective imagination.

The coronavirus pandemic is, on every level, a product of globalisation. It highlights the latter's characteristics and tendencies. It is an active, combative and effective free-trade agent. It takes part in the wider process through which a culture becomes undone, to be replaced by something which is less a culture and more a system of forces indistinguishably technical, economic, authoritarian and sometimes psychological or physical (if we think of oil or the atom). Of course, this process brings into question the economic development model, so that the French President feels obliged to report on it. It's quite possible that we shall have to change our algorithms – but there is no proof that this will serve to usher in a new era.

Indeed, eradicating a virus is not enough. If technical and political mastery proves to be like its outcome, it will only turn the world into a field of forces tensed and pitted against each other, henceforth stripped of any of the civilising elements that came into play previously. The contagious brutality of the virus spreads as administrative brutality. We are already dealing with the need to select those eligible for treatment. (And this is not counting the inevitable economic and social injustices.) This is not some underhanded plot devised by an unknown sinister conspirator. Nor is it the result of abuses on the part of nations. The only thing at work is the general law of interconnections, whose mastery is the aim of techno-economic powers.

In the past, pandemics could be considered divine punishment, just as illness in general was seen for a very long time as external to the social body. Today, most illnesses are endogenous, caused by our living conditions, the quality of our food and the toxicity of our environment. What used to be divine has become human – too human, as Nietzsche says. For a long time, modernity could be defined according to Pascal's formula "Man infinitely surpasses man". But if he surpasses himself "too much", that is, without rising to the Pascalian divine – then he does not surpass himself at all. Instead, he becomes mired in a humanity overwhelmed by the events and situations it has produced.

Indeed, the virus confirms the absence of the divine, since we know its biological nature. We are even discovering how much more complex and harder to define living beings are, than we had previously described them to be. We are also discovering to what extent the exercise of political power – that of a people, that of a so-called "community", like the "European" community or a military dictatorship – is another form of complexity, once again harder to define than we might have thought. We understand better now how inadequate the term "biopolitics" is in these conditions. Life and politics challenge us together. Our scientific knowledge tells us that we are

dependent only on our own technical power, but there is no pure technicity because the knowledge itself includes uncertainties (one only has to read the published studies). Because technical power is not unequivocal, how much less unequivocal must a political power be, while supposedly guided by objective data, and expected to respond to legitimate expectations?

Of course, decisions must nevertheless be based on presumed objectivity. If this objectivity dictates “confinement” or “distancing”, how far should authorities go to enforce them? And, of course, inversely, at what point can we speak of the vested interests of a government that wants – for example – to preserve the Olympic Games from which it expects to profit, as do many businesses and sports managers in whose behalf the government is acting as well? Or the interests of a government which takes this opportunity to rekindle nationalist feelings?

The viral magnifying glass enlarges the characteristics of our contradictions and of our limitations. It is a reality principle that collides with the pleasure principle. Death is its companion. Death, that we exported with wars, famines and devastation, that we thought we confined to a few other viruses and to cancers (now in quasi-viral expansion), now waits for us around the corner. What do you know! We are humans, two-legged, without feathers and gifted with language, but certainly neither superhuman, nor transhuman. Too human? Or are we to understand that there can be no such thing as “too” human, and that it is precisely this which surpasses us infinitely?