

The Pandemic is Not an Event

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It is perhaps a symptom of the present-day invasion of the contagion and its resulting manias that multiple desires and projections are placed on to the current pandemic that reflect the failures of politics, love, science, and art. It is, after all, one of the important lessons of Lacan—do not give up on your desire. The pandemic is an existentially relevant moment for its singularity, historical specificity, and interruption of everyday life at a global scale. It is also a well-timed opportunity to re-interrogate and reflect on three aspects of the situation: the fantasies of the world we were inhabiting, the time of the now, and the coming world.

To seek to understand this present rupture created by the pandemic and the political events that will surely follow, the political desire for a more equal world needs to take center stage beyond the temporary forms of emergency socialism now being performed as triage. It will be in the realm of politics, economics, and culture that decisions about the structure of the world and how power operates will ultimately be decided. It will very much be baked into the confrontation with the existing forms of power in the world as it is, and its monstrous disease of inequities that is at stake as the battle lines are drawn. Moreover, the recent killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and countless other Black people sparked unprecedented protests in support of real, structural change and clearly exposed the blatant racism of the everyday that has gone on for decades beyond the civil rights movement.¹

Interventions in public health are racialized and decisions about whose bodies matter and whose do not are made at geopolitical scales in real time. The colonial and privatized inertias that attempt a rational, Western explanation inevitably leave out entire parts of the world where

defensive responses to the virus have much to teach the so-called developed world. The emaciated international structures created after the Second World War are on life support, impotent in the face of multiple, large-scale crises. But it is in the imposed social control that the very colonization of the human body, the unconscious, and libidinal desires are enacted.

History is a good reminder that pandemics are often simultaneously deadly and banal. The Antonine Plague killed 5 million. The Justinian Plague left 30–50 million dead. The Black Death killed 200 million. The smallpox epidemic of 1520 left 56 million dead. The inaccurately named Spanish Flu had a death toll of 40–50 million. HIV/AIDS killed 25–35 million since 1980. The pandemic flu of 1957–58 and the pandemic flu of 1968–70 killed over 1 million each. The novel coronavirus will likely be the most lethal pandemic of the past 100 years apart from 1918–20 and HIV/AIDS; the deaths will likely exceed the mortality rates inflicted by the influenza strains of 1957 and 1968 by the time this subsides in to some form of a new normal.²

There are those that would make the argument that COVID-19 is an event in the field of science for its absolute singularity, the scale and spread of a worldwide pandemic not seen in our collective lifetimes. But, in the field of science, is this so novel? Pandemics have engulfed the world from the very beginnings of civilization—none of this is particularly *new*. Certainly, we are compelled to understand the perils of the political moment from historical, sociological, and theoretical perspectives, but COVID-19 does not constitute an event as Alain Badiou would define it. It is historically important from the perspective of science and as a phenomenon in the world, but it is not an event. For Badiou, an event is defined as something rare and exceptional, radically contingent that happens at a site but the truths that derive from it can be universalized.³ Pandemics certainly are major phenomena in the world that change society, but they are not

events in and of themselves. The liberatory potential of their fall-outs are yet to be determined and, certainly, there may be events in the future that the fallout of the pandemic contributes to.

Pandemics are a kind of banal trauma that have always lurked over the shoulder of human civilization in the blind spot, particularly in the human tendency for continual encroachment on the environment and dominating relationship to the more-than-human world that is a contributing factor in the accelerated arrival of new viruses that leap across the species threshold. But the pandemic is also not insignificant. The novel coronavirus, through its ferocious potency, has put capitalism on hold for a brief moment in a way that the Left has been unable to do this century. Countries around the world are, in a novel way, briefly practicing *crisis socialism* to maintain the social order.

The Magic of the State and Reactive Subjectivities

The policy blueprints that are being drawn up in the back rooms to restore capitalism are not of the same orientation. The billionaire elites are imagining a repetition of the world as it is, with a turbo-boost of global automation to impose on top of the planetary computation that has been unrolled since the mid-80s to coincide with the neo-liberal era—there is no alternative to this political imaginary they would have you believe. Jeff Bezos, the Amazon tycoon, is on his way to becoming a trillionaire while owning Whole Foods, and Bill Gates is busy saving us from ourselves through his brand-building philanthropy.

This is where politics lurks and the site where a resolution to the structural tension of power will need to be resolved in the political terrain. The state, so derided in the neo-liberal era, is back in fashion momentarily, but only insofar as it is a stand-in for maintaining the established social order and continuing its repetition as long as possible. Massive bailouts of companies and

public subsidies and expansions of public healthcare and the social safety net are momentarily plausible. All of a sudden, money can virtually be printed and governments can loan money to themselves without the private banks as intermediaries. The system has its own states of exception when an existential crisis arrives. The foundations of the world's financial systems function on speculative fictions by design.

COVID-19 is certainly a rupture from the world as it is and is a collective trauma of truly global proportions that involves neither war, nor a normal cyclical collapse of the economic system. But if one lived in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Palestine, Rwanda, and many other places, including the inner cities of North America, this is not the most vivid trauma of one's lifetime. There will either be a hardening of the direction of recent history with higher concentrations of wealth in the hands of fewer and fewer people, expansions of authoritarian populism, or we can also imagine a reorganization not seen since the end of the Second World War. This is where the battle lines will be drawn. The environmental question, also one of the root causes of the virus, is ever present and haunting the contemporary moment as it is the scriptwriter of the near future. The politics of the freedom of movement and imagining a borderless world, beyond the disciplinary structures and codes of the present one, are part of the political stakes at play.

For Badiou, Lacan and psychoanalysis operate in the field of love in terms of its proximity to the real. The fundamental distinction between philosophy and psychoanalysis is that the latter is also a practice. For Lacan, philosophy plugs the hole of politics. In identifying the symptoms of a sick world, philosophy attempts to unmask the fragility of the world and questions its ideological foundations and articulates the lack in politics. Lacan argues that the unconscious expresses itself in the Real.

Writing on the coronavirus, Alain Badiou argues, “let us not give credence, even and especially in our isolation, except to truths that are controllable by science and to the grounded perspectives of a new politics, of its localized experiences as well as its strategic aims.”⁴

When large collective phenomena present themselves as a disruption to the world, one is left with the function and domination of trauma and affect as a totalizing condition that overtakes the collective imaginary and the self to re-present a new world. With the proliferation of the virus, the porousness of where one’s body begins and the other ends, and the matrices of entanglement, control, symptoms, shame, and the bodily chains of transmission that inextricably bind one to the interior self and to the other come to the surface. A whole set of words and phrases that attach and reconfigure bodily affects begins to circulate: shedding, residues, bowels, guts, viscera, semen, lungs, kidneys, shame, the relationship to the machine, the ethics of care, friendship, community, and the wholesale disruptions of daily life and suspension of freedoms.

The virus is a destroyer of worlds. This emaciated existence, deprived of desire and infectious, is confined to the struggle to once again breathe. The shame and sickness that drives the toilet-paper frenzy, to be left in a place of not being able to wipe one’s own ass without the known material comforts, to contemplate the erogenous zone of the anus as the symptom of the death drive, deprived of all libidinal pleasure.

Badiou writes that, “Philosophy’s duty is clear: to reconstitute rationally the infinite reserve of the affirmative that every liberating project requires. Philosophy is not, and has never been, that which disposes by itself of the effective figures of emancipation. Such is the primordial task of what concentrates on making thinking political. Instead, philosophy is like the attic where, in difficult times, one accumulates resources, lines up tools and sharpens knives.”⁵ Philosophy, functioning on its own terrain, clarifies the choices of thought, the distance between

thought and power (the distance between the state and truths), and clarifies the value of the exception. The exception constitutes the opening that the rupture, resulting from the event, brings to the surface. In moments of crisis, the state attempts to reaffirm its role as the symbolic representation of the people and the guarantor of the unity of the nation, and difference is confined to the margins. In these moments, it is the reinforcing of identitarian drives, brute racism, and everyday xenophobias that is brought in to the circulation of everyday life. The pandemic arrives at a time when the triumph of global capitalism is well established but the sites of resistance remain vague. This is the first real interruption at a global scale that is beyond a cyclical economic collapse or war. The state is in crisis and being reimagined today as a site of possibility. Global capitalism has been better at a project of the withering away of the state than the Left has been in recent memory. The pandemic represents the collapse of work and life, and the return of the politics of home. The state in this moment is the algorithmic regulator of movement, speed, and discipline.

As Lacan would say, anxiety is not without an object. The infected haunt us and reveal the truths of worlds. The weakening of states has led to withdrawal and new forms of imperialism are attempting to assert themselves. As Badiou writes, contemporary fascism is the primary reactive form to the crisis of capitalism.⁶ Fascism is a death drive rooted in identity.

Pandemics are health emergencies superimposed upon prior emergencies that are still ongoing. In-custody policing deaths of Black and Indigenous peoples predate the injustices of this pandemic. Deaths from fentanyl contamination are far outpacing deaths caused by COVID-19 in BC—they have been caused by supply and distribution disruptions of the street drug supply and people being left alone to use in their rooms without friends and community in proximity, amplified by COVID-related restrictions.

The pandemic unleashes the chaotic deterritorialization of space and bodies. Franco Berardi writes that: "... today, the distinction between the individual and the collective has been blurred. Crowds and multitudes are involved in automatic chains of behavior, driven by techno-linguistic dispositives. The automation of individual behavior—since individuals have been integrally penetrated and concatenated by techno-linguistic interfaces—results in a swarm effect."⁷ The impossibility of physical distancing and the curtailment to the freedom of movement open up other questions about the surveillance regime and its technologies. As Hannah Arendt wrote, "of all the specific liberties which may come into our minds when we hear the word 'freedom...freedom of movement is historically the oldest and also the most elementary. Being able to depart for where we will is the prototypical gesture of being free, as limitation of freedom of movement has from time immemorial been the precondition for enslavement."⁸ And it is also, she articulates, through freedom of movement that action becomes possible.

Viral Time

When the pandemic goes viral, it is the possibility of the crowd that dissipates and without warning, is named the enemy. Precisely when community and mutual aid are necessary, the state intervenes to call for emergency, quarantine, or that rather Orwellian turn of phrase: *social distancing*. It is the foreshadowing of emergencies to come, not least of which is the ecological. Public health has a long, troubled history in its relationship to democracy and equality in the emergency, for it functions not only on reason and science, but also on the function of hierarchy, command, and racialization when the crisis arrives.

While the political and journalistic rhetoric is that “we are all in this together,” people are physically asked to stand apart, at a distance, for the collective good. In a time of eroding government trust, the suspension of liberties, civic life, and the conferring of new powers brings forward the crisis of duration where trust is on trial. The hollowed-out systems of public health, particularly the racket of the American-privatized model, become overwhelmed and the choice of who receives care or who does not is made at the triage of the frontline of the newly-named crisis. The borders thicken. The machines breathe for us, but there is a line-up and an adjudication of who matters.

When the state intervenes in a pandemic, it disrupts the possibility of the existence of the crowd, which is, ultimately, a political matter. Elias Canetti, in his work *Crowds and Power*, defines four features of the crowd: it always wants to grow, within the crowd there is equality, the crowd loves density and, the crowd needs direction. The current crisis asks us to re-examine the meaning of the crowd.⁹

The experts who call for emergency move like a pack whose membership is decided and have the power to decree by command. In such times, a solidarity from below is necessary.

Writing of epidemics in Ancient Greece, Thucydides wrote that “people died like flies. The bodies of the dying were heaped one on top of the other, and half-dead creatures could be seen staggering about in the streets or flocking round the fountains in their desire for water.”¹⁰ Different than a natural disaster like an earthquake or a flood, people see the advance of death taking place before them by an unknown power.

When the force of the virus gives itself time in which to operate, it not only becomes power but it also overtakes everything in its wake. It enters into the realm of disaster. It is like a command that comes from outside and above, imposed upon community. As Canetti writes, “if

we would master power, we must face command openly and boldly, and search for means to deprive it of its sting.”¹¹

In an article about the various government measures to contain COVID-19, Giorgio Agamben, apart from terribly regrettable and rushed comments,¹² wrote that “the emergency measures obligate us in fact to live in conditions of curfew. But a war with an invisible enemy that can lurk in every other person is the most absurd of wars. It is, in reality, a civil war. The enemy is not outside, it is within us.”¹³

All of its effects imply separations and regulations—spatial partitioning, endless inspections, the regulatory control of disciplinary order, and policing of the self for the public good. The upending of government systems, capital flows, the redeploying of infrastructures, and the pleas for military intervention in a mere passage of weeks bring with it an amped-up drumbeat of war-like rhetorics and framings and uncritical talk of emergency powers for the greater good. “Close borders” and “keep supply chains open” are a cry and a demand. There is no crisis—stay calm is the message. We’ve got this.

The virus arrives both as an enemy from outside and within—an unforeseen invasion that arrives to name the crisis. It can operate as easily as the logic of the strongman, deployed for the protection of nation or for the public good, the elderly, and the weak—the borderlines become blurry as the long apparatus of the state intervenes. The search for a hero narrative begins, particularly in the rugged individualism of the broken American psyche and its deteriorating relationship to universal empire.

Foucault wrote that “the exile of the leper and the arrest of the plague do not bring with them the same political dream...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.”¹⁴ The amnesias of the present day regarding the plagues of the past coincide with the reactionary, authoritarian populisms in circulation today. The plague is indeed the arrival of confusion and disorder, and brings to the surface the very questions of sovereignty that are at stake today. As many have famously said, the sovereign is the one who decides on the exception. And the emergency that precedes the exception has already arrived.

The virus does not discriminate or recognize borders, international treaties, or care about the toxic origin stories of blood and soil—it is, by its very nature, an alien opportunist that arrives in the blind spot seeking total contamination, exposing the hollowed-out frailties and inequities of the state. As emergency powers appear and total mobilization in the guise of the public good arrives to *save us*, keeping one’s ear to the ground to listen to the present heartbeat of the normalized erosion of liberties enters into the zone of responsibility. For what is left of the shadow of democracy, the emergency of contamination and hysteria has landed down and nested a little too easily.

As Michael Hardt writes, “the composition or the constitution of the multitude does not in any way negate the multiplicity of social forces, but on the contrary, raises the multiplicity to a higher level of power...filling out the passage from multiplicity to multitude remains for us the central project for a democratic political practice.”¹⁵

If there is a political task today, it is to also recover the word *ma-fia*—its origins are not as a secret criminal society but a means to protect one’s family and loved ones from the injustice of government or any other centralizing authority.¹⁶ From that archaeology derives the question, *in whom do you trust and how can a political solidarity be redefined and reborn in this time with a potency to topple that which no longer needs to be?*

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- ¹ Alia Chughtai, “Know Their Names: Black People Killed in the US,” Al Jazeera, retrieved September 7th, 2020, <https://interactive.aljazeera.com/aje/2020/know-their-names/index.html>.
- ² Nicholas Lapan, “Visualizing the History of Pandemics,” VisualCapitalist.com, March 14th, 2020, <https://www.visualcapitalist.com/history-of-pandemics-deadliest/>.
- ³ Andy McLaverty Robinson, “Alain Badiou: The Event,” Ceasefire, December 15, 2014, retrieved September 7th, 2020, <https://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/alain-badiou-event/>.
- ⁴ Alain Badiou, *On the Epidemic Situation*, trans. Alberto Toscano, Verso, March 23, 2020, retrieved May 25th, 2020, <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4608-on-the-epidemic-situation>.
- ⁵ Alain Badiou, *Polemics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (London: Verso, 2006), 35.
- ⁶ Alain Badiou, *Our Wound is Not So Recent* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016).
- ⁷ Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi, *And: Phenomenology of the End*, (South Pasadena: Semiotext(e), 2015), 29.
- ⁸ Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), 9.
- ⁹ Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, trans. Carol Stewart (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1984), 29.
- ¹⁰ RG Collingwood, *The Ideas of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), 82.
- ¹¹ Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, 470.
- ¹² Joseph Owen, “States of Emergency, Metaphors of Virus and COVID-19,” Verso.com, March 31st, 2020, retrieved September 8th, 2020, <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4636-states-of-emergency-metaphors-of-virus-and-covid-19>.
- ¹³ Giorgio Agamben, “The Invention of an Epidemic,” *European Journal of Psychoanalysis*, February 26th, 2020, retrieved May 25th, 2020, <https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/coronavirus-and-philosophers/>.
- ¹⁴ Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison (excerpt), *European Journal of Psychoanalysis*, retrieved May 25th, 2010, <https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/coronavirus-and-philosophers/>.
- ¹⁵ Michael Hardt, *Gilles Deleuze: An Apprenticeship in Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 122.
- ¹⁶ “Origins of the Mafia,” May 28th, 2019, retrieved, September 7th, 2020, <https://www.history.com/topics/crime/origins-of-the-mafia>.